

## Heideggerian Da-sein in the airport customer experience

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*Abstract: By using Heidegger's concept of Da-sein this paper will investigate the meaning that airport customers ascribe to the airport. Looking at the meaning of the airport experience for individual airport customers will allow researchers to develop an understanding of what it is like to be in an airport. This understanding of being in an airport is a novel approach to the management literature which has in the past focused on the effective management of airports. The knowledge of what it is like to be in an airport will enable management to better care for the airport passenger or visitor, to create a more hospitable environment and therefore and lead to their becoming the preferred airport.*

## Introduction

This paper considers Heidegger's concept of Da-sein or 'being there'. The airport is an environment that people find themselves in – often without any choice. Once there they are encouraged to engage in food and beverage experiences and 'retail therapy' but at the same time they are physically held in a series of secure and sterile spaces and processed in order to efficiently fill and empty aircraft which need to arrive and depart on tight schedules. This contradiction of emotions in the experience of being in an airport is reminiscent of Derrida's (2000a; 2000b) 'hostipitality' and is very appropriate for a Heideggerian phenomenological investigation as it investigates the 'experience' of the airport customer, whether that be travellers, meeters and greeters or 'farewellers' as we call them in New Zealand.

The airport environment has been written about extensively from the perspective of a mobilities paradigm (Kraftl & Adey, 2008; Adey, 2007; Adey, Budd & Hubbard, 2007; Adey, 2006a; Adey, 2006b) but also around the topic of security and surveillance (Adey, 2009; 2004a; 2004b). Much of this is in the geographical literature with papers presented at the Royal Geographical Society's Annual Conference, but there is an obvious link in to hospitality with implications for the service experience, the experience economy and facilities management, all of which have been debated in the literature and at previous CHME conferences (Hemmington, 2007; O'Gorman, 2006; 2007; 2009; ). The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate airport customers' perceptions of their experience of the airport. Individual airport customers were interviewed in the actual environment being researched – the airport. The Heideggerian concept of 'Da-sein' or 'being there' assisted in the evaluation of the hospitableness of the airport experience.

## What is Da-sein?

Martin Heidegger was a German philosopher (1889-1976) who contributed to the concept of phenomenology as developed by Husserl (1859-1938). Heidegger's most well-known contribution is 'Being and time', published in German in 1927 as *Sein und Zeit* (SEP, 2011). In his later years Heidegger became less dogmatic and more reflective, inviting discussion. For the purpose of this paper, the Heideggerian concept of Da-sein is the focus. In the 'translator's preface' to *Being and Time* (BT) the point is made that Heidegger specifically requested the hyphenating of Da-sein, explaining that he did not want people to think it only meant 'existence' rather than the more active and involved being *there* in the moment (Heidegger, 1953/1996). This research was deliberately conducted in the airport, in the actual environment and while people were experiencing the airport.

Somewhat worryingly, Heidegger himself states 'the concept of "being" is indefinable' (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 2). This is perhaps what Inwood (1997) means when he writes, 'what Heidegger notices, and presents in conceptual garb, is in a way obvious to anyone once it is pointed out to them' (Inwood, 1997, p. 36). This study asked participants to reflect on their airport experience and in doing so hopefully to find out what people see when they take a second look at the airport environment – one which for many people is either too confusing or

bewildering to make sense of, or so routine that they are no longer able to distinguish one trip or one airport from another. Very pertinent to this study of the airport customer experience, Inwood suggests that,

*What Dasein understands is not so much any particular item in its environment, as its environment as a whole and its own place in it. But Dasein does not simply understand its environment as one might understand an alien text or culture from which one is entirely disengaged.*  
(Inwood, 1997, p. 45)

Heidegger makes the point that a bridge creates a crossing point, which in turn creates the banks of the river. In the same way, it could be argued that the establishment of an airport creates such a crossing point – from the earth to the sky or from one country to another. All the paraphernalia that surrounds an airport in terms of technology, engineering, logistics, security, shopping, retail, leisure and accommodation develops only because the airport is there – and all of that in turn creates the airport customer experience. Heidegger himself prefers to explain Da-sein as a ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger, 1953/1996, p. 41), and this study considers how those individuals spending time at Auckland airport chose to describe their experience of being in the airport during the course of this research.

## **Methodology**

Our study was aimed at identifying the factors influencing the airport customer’s experience. 130 ‘guided conversations’ were conducted with airport customers at Auckland airport’s food court area in the International Terminal between December 2012 and June 2013 and with members of management, security, customs, concessionaires, transport operators and customer assistance personnel. The reason for having conversations instead of the more traditional ‘interviews’ was to explore the airport customer’s perspective as they saw it, rather than those of airport management or researchers. A number of prompts were prepared and approved by the university’s research ethics committee, but these were rarely required as many people were found to hold strong views on the airport environment and were very keen to voice them. All conversations were recorded with permission and transcribed by the researcher as soon as possible afterwards resulting in almost 25 000 words of text to analyse. An observational and reflective log was also completed for the duration of the research. While this was certainly a ‘convenience sample’ in the sense that there was no specific sampling frame, the researcher found people extremely willing to discuss their airport experiences, and only 10 people out of the 140 who were initially approached declined to participate in the research (a 92% response rate). All interviews were conducted in the food court area just before the departures area in the international terminal of Auckland airport. It was found that there was a wide variety of people in this area, from those waiting to check in, those waiting for their flight to be called, those waiting for others to arrive and those waiting for connecting flights.

The approach used to analyse the stories that people told about their airport experiences was based around the principles of Interpretive Phenomenological

Analysis (IPA) as discussed by Smith (2004), Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005) and Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) acknowledging its origins in Husserl's concept of 'consciousness', Heidegger's hermeneutics and Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism. Within the hospitality literature Morrison and O'Gorman (2008) use a similar approach and O'Gorman and Gillespie (2010) created an analytical framework based on an IPA approach to evaluate the reliance of international hospitality leaders on storytelling as a way to share their vision for the company with their staff.

The next section considers the main themes that emerged from the data using the above approach. These were arrived at by an iterative re-reading of the transcripts and the key literature. Common elements in the participants' stories were noted and then grouped into themes.

### **Da-sein in airports**

This section considers some of the key themes to emerge from the data which appear to have an impact on people's Da-sein of the airport. This is Heideggerian because it considers people's experiences or their 'lived experiences' as Van Manen (1990) called it.

*Doing nothing.* Many respondents mentioned that airports were a time for 'down-time' or doing nothing. Not all of them saw this as a negative thing, and 'people watching' was a popular if rather involuntary pastime, as was eating and shopping. Some made the point however that 'airports are the quickest way to get around but a pretty terrible way to travel' (Male, 50). Others commented,

It's sort of like an incarceration. Dubai is the worst airport. It is cyclical and feels like groundhog day. You see the same person come past every five minutes (Male, 30).

Airport users seem to accept that time spent at the airport is a kind of 'down-time' which is an inevitable consequence of a global business and personal environment. 'It has all the amenities you need to waste a couple of hours before your flight' (Female, 30).

*Hospitality.* Hospitality and safety have historically been closely linked and it is hard to have one without the other. Comments such as 'we wanted to be safe' (Male, 20) were made, and airport staff's concern for the safety of travellers was appreciated 'The immigration guy was worried about me staying here overnight' (Female, 30). It was noted that 'as soon as you get off the plane and come into the building you feel welcome. People are really nice' (Male, 50).

Respondents were quite perceptive and reflective about the nature of hospitality and the airport experience 'I would say, if you have the time, airports can be hospitable. Although – it's not the actual airport, but the people working in it' (Male, 70).

Several commented on hospitable actions in the context of solving problems that airport customers experienced. 'While I was waiting I was watching what was

going on, and I was quite proud of how the NZ staff dealt with some difficult passengers at Customs' (Female, 60). 'The airport is very good. My flight was delayed but they gave me a telephone with Spanish assistance on the other end who told me the news in Spanish' (Male, 50). Additional support for vulnerable groups was noted 'Good airport for young children – they took us to the front of the line' (Female, 30).

*Purpose of the airport.* A number of travellers commented on what they perceived to be the overall role and purpose of an airport in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. 'Airports have very little to do with aircraft and everything to do with land development' (Male, 60). 'Somewhere like Heathrow, which is really busy, they need to focus on getting people through. Auckland is more for tourism so it is more important (to be hospitable)' (Female, 20).

*Security.* People's perceptions of the airport security processes often depended on what they had seen in the media. 'I found that security – after watching the TV programme – was a lot more relaxed than I was expecting. "Have you got any food? No? OK, come on in"' (Male, 30). Again, comparisons with experiences at other airports were made. 'We found Australian security staff absolutely oafish and boorish. When we came in here there was a delay and one of the security staff came down the line apologizing for the delay' (Female, 60). 'I was in Dallas in Fort Worth and they made me take my shoes off while I had a leg in plaster and on crutches – they did not care and just watched me struggle' (Male, 20).

However, not everyone felt the need to have human contact and quite a number commented on the recently installed scanners for passports and eye retina 'The smartgate was really great. Love the express lanes through customs. I'm 79 and I can use them!' (Male, 79). It therefore seems that hospitality and security is a combination of efficiency, organization and helpfulness, all in a comfortable physical environment.

*The physical environment.* A carefully planned and well-maintained physical environment was considered by many to be essential for a stress-free airport experience. 'The ease with which things happen or do not happen is a good measure of how successful an airport is – you do not want people dragging their suitcases into dead-ends' (Male, 60). As well as clean air and appropriate temperatures, lighting (particularly natural) was felt to be important for a positive airport experience. 'They make it as friendly as possible with plants and sunlight – if there were more windows then people would not be so stressed out' (Male, 60). 'I think the airport is a really nice design. I like the light and stuff – Melbourne is old and skodey' (Female, 30). The constant changes and developments at airports was felt to be frustrating. 'Everything always changes at airports. McDonald's used to over there but now it is over here' (Female, 30). Airport users were conscious of their responsibility to make the process flow but were critical if they felt others had not done their part. 'We checked in online so all we wanted to do was drop off our bags – but we know that's Emirates' problem not the airport's' (Female, 60). 'Interesting that the self-check-in machines still seem to require a lot of staff. I like the control they give me' (Female, 40). 'It is much better using the self-check-in as you can check in earlier

than waiting for a desk to open' (Female, 30).

*A sense of place.* Very important to airport management is that the airport should have a sense of place – a sense of being *somewhere*. Some passengers clearly did not feel this and commented 'all airports are the same. There's nothing special' (Female, 20); 'You could be in any food court in any shopping mall' (Male, 60) and 'In a lot of ways airports are all quite similar' (Male, 20) but others recognized the challenge airport management faced in creating a sense of identity 'It's a bit like shopping malls – how do you make them different?' (Male, 60) and 'I think it is nice to be greeted by the sounds of the forest and the Maori thing coming along, although I understand an airport is a functional processing operation – but an airport needs to create an image of a country which will make visitors feel comfortable as soon as they hit the ground' (Male, 50). 'Other airports have duplicate – same – same – same. This is like a little village. This has definitely got a place atmosphere to it' (Male, 50). 'I like the Maori carving and the birdsong – even after a 28 hour journey' (Female, 20). 'The thing I really like is the Maori carving and then you turn the corner and you see the big windows across the Manukau harbour and ... man... it's so clean. It makes you realize you are home again' (Male, 30). 'As you walk from Domestic to here it is nice to see people sleeping under a tree' (Female, 60). 'I think Auckland is very peaceful – and it helps that you have a bit of fresh air between domestic and international' (Male, 70).

*Personal travel philosophies.* Experience of travelling was a recurrent theme, although not everyone felt that more travel was a good thing. One respondent admitted, 'after 26 years of flying and queuing and waiting and being in confined spaces... airports don't do it for me anymore' (Male, 60). Another pointed out that to him, 'simplistically, airports are not a destination' (Male, 60). 'At every airport I have got to I have been tired when I arrived – so I don't really notice that much' (Male, 30). 'At each airport you kind of fumble around trying to work it out' (Male, 60). The suggestion is that the personal attitude to airports and those who use them may influence the individual airport experience – perhaps more than the actual number of retail or catering facilities.

## **Reflections and conclusions**

This paper considered the challenging environment of an international airport – where compromises need to be made between processing large numbers of travellers and those meeting or farewelling them, between security and hospitality, and between being welcoming and commercially successful. By using Heidegger's concept of *Da-sein*, this paper focuses on the individual experiences airport customers have while they are physically inside an airport building. The large variety and contrasting experiences show the value of this concept – being an airport customer is very much an *individual* experience where each person interprets their experience according to their particular situation, the multiple touch points that make up their airport experience, and their own personal travel philosophy. However, through a reflective and hermeneutic analysis of the airport customer comments, seven main themes have been identified by the researchers. These are: doing nothing; hospitality; purpose of the airport;

security; physical environment; sense of place and personal travel philosophy. It is suggested that these themes should not all be considered as equally important. Perhaps the best way to conceptualise this is using a triangle such as Maslow used for his 'hierarchy of needs'. At the base of the pyramid would be the 'processing' aspect that would be eased by good facilities management but also a sense of welcome/hospitality. The next level would be 'passing time' where, if the traveller or those accompanying them have been dealt with quickly and effectively they can relax and enjoy the retail, food and beverage and entertainment provided. The third level would be achieved if the airport environment provided a particular unique experience or stimulus and could be called a 'sense of place' contrasting with Augé's (1995) 'non-place' or Relph's (1976) 'placelessness'.

However, it was also found that the state-of-mind of the individual finding themselves in the airport was affected by what might perhaps be called their individual 'personal travel philosophy'. There were a number of examples of people spending up to twenty-four hours in the airport being studied and yet appearing extremely relaxed and even content. While in some cases this was due to their reason for travel (backpacking), in others it was the fact that they had experienced many different airports. Confusingly for airport management therefore, it seems possible that two airport customers could be experiencing a very different da-sein while physically in the same location. Finally, it is instructive to look back at something written in the early years of UK hospitality management education. Medlik (1989, p. 119) pointed out,

Airline seats and hotel beds may be seen as individual products by their suppliers but, as far as the tourist is concerned, they are only product components.

Perhaps therefore the airport customers are the only relevant judges of what constitutes a 'hospitable experience in an airport context.

It is proposed that each of these themes should be considered by airport management as, taken together, they can give a valuable insight into the actual experience that airport customers have. While this was one case study of a relatively small airport in the Pacific (14 million passengers per annum), the researchers suggest that these themes may well be present in other airport settings, although the type (destination or hub airport) and size of the airport will obviously impact on the experience and the feasibility of extensive facilities. While there is no intention to generalize from these findings, Polit and Beck (2010) urge qualitative researchers to consider transferring their understanding of one situation to a similar environment in a different location, as there may be lessons that can be learned. It is therefore suggested that the understanding of the Da-sein of the airport customer experience that this paper provides should allow the knowledge to be transferred to another location.

These findings are part of an ongoing PhD study so there is considerably more analysis to be done. The authors would welcome correspondence from others working in similar areas of hospitality or using similar methodological and

philosophical approaches.

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